

Toronto 2009

By Brandon Wee

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TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2009 HIGHLIGHTS

There was no missing the withered appearance of Toronto's biggest film event this year, an inevitability that had been consuming it like a malignant tumour due to sustained economic famine. The cardinal symptoms were there for all to see: screening cutbacks, less-than-full houses, and sluggish industry business. Nevertheless, TIFF's choice of Tel Aviv for its inaugural 'City to City' program precipitated a spectacular publicity coup for itself when both detractors and supporters battled defensively - to the point of making international headlines. No particular theme or region stood out in this year's relatively tame line-up, although several thrillers provided welcome escapism:

Accident (Soi Cheang, Hong Kong 2009)

On paper, Soi Cheang's *Accident* sounds intriguing: the unity between four assassins specializing in disguising murders as accidents takes a hit when their latest job misfires and their ringleader (Louis Koo, dressed to kill) suspects he has been elaborately targeted too. But on screen, all this feels way too sluggish and subtle to come across as a genre flick. Koo's paranoid genius is a solid character, but the man he suspects (a forgettable Richie Ren) is simply unconvincing as his alleged foe. Although Johnnie To is credited as the film's producer, no conclusive trace of his fingerprints can be found.

At the End of Daybreak (Ho Yuhang, Hong Kong /Malaysia /South Korea 2009)

When the sexual relationship between a young male and an underage female is discovered, the girl's parents decide to blackmail the sheltered boy and his protective single mother (Hong Kong actress Kara Hui) in return for not reporting the matter. But this only hastens a snowball of unintended consequences for all parties. Ho's fourth feature is his most accessible to date, yet retains his thematic interest in urban alienation. Here too, he singles out Malaysia's ethnic Chinese middle class for a brutal back alley thrashing. (The late Malaysian director, Yasmin Ahmad, makes her last screen appearance in a loving cameo.)

The Disappearance of Alice Creed (J. Blakeson, United Kingdom 2009)

Set largely in a single location with just three characters, J Blakeson's debut feature about an abduction is a thrill to experience. To heighten suspense, Blakeson plays a couple of wild cards, none of which even the sharpest of viewers will be able to see coming. While the film occasionally relies on dull narrative contrivances (a shackled character reaching for a pair of keys), the economy of things is inspiring. Martin Compston and Gemma Arterton turn in pitch perfect performances, as does Eddie Marsan, who can always be trusted to be a pit bull when the yarn calls for it.

The Father of My Children (Mia Hansen-Løve, Germany / France 2009)

Unfolding as a diptych, Hansen-Løve's intense domestic drama introduces a workaholic but doting father in the first act, then in the second, shows how his wife and three young daughters must deal with his unconscionable decision to abandon their family. Reprising their familial roles on screen, real-life father and daughter Louis-Do and Alice de Lencquesaing deliver the goods with understated performances. There's also considerable self-reflexivity and numerous in-jokes in the story, which is apparently inspired by true events: the father is a harried film producer whose independent production company is sinking fast under the weight of ego and misguided ambition.

Mother (Bong Joon-ho, South Korea 2009)

After a hat trick of solid features culminating in the brilliance of 2006's *The Host*, Bong Joon-ho shows his fallibility with this hackneyed portrait of a middle-aged woman bent on absolving her retarded son of guilt after errant police work finds him guilty of murder. Gone are the creative suspense arcs that made Bong's mastery of the thriller so rivetting. Instead, *Mother* feels awkward at every turn: funny when it should be gripping, facetious when it should feel twisted. Bong has carelessly described Kim Hye-ja's character as a monster of a mother, but she's really just playing a regular pussycat.

Police, Adjective (Corneliu Porumboiu, Romania 2009)

As its title implies, Corneliu Porumboiu's smartly conceived story about semantics in the law tells of an undercover detective's reluctance to lay charges on a teenager whom he knows is a petty hashish trafficker because of both his moral opposition to the penalty and his strong belief that the law in question will soon be repealed. But in the dramatic final act, a biting, interrogative talk by his boss eager to close the case establishes the film's existential concern: can the *letter* and *spirit* of the law stand shoulder to shoulder? In the startling closing frame, Porumboiu suggests they cannot.

A Prophet (Jacques Audiard, France / Italy 2009)

Jacques Audiard's conventional crime thriller charting the fortunes of a teenager in a French prison run by a Corsican mob is nonetheless a magnetic account of a man who rises from a pawn to become a seasoned rook: by exploiting his ignominy as a minion in order to advance his criminal interests while on probation. Tahar Rahim is impressive as Malik, the film's eponymous character, as is Niels Arestrup in his critical role as César, the Corsican ringleader deluded by his corrupt power as a prisoner. However, Audiard's motif of a phantom character is less compelling as a narrative device.

The Secret in Their Eyes (Juan José Campanella, Argentina /Spain 2009)

A writer's reminiscence on his life disguised as a love story, disguised in turn as a murder mystery, Juan José Campanella's brooding tale on the menaces of memory is a rare stunner. Retired court investigator, Benjamin (Ricardo Darín) decides to re-examine the rape and murder of a young woman during his youth - a time when his peers and loved ones were eager to dismiss the case. Moved by the passion of the dead woman's shattered widower to seek justice, Benjamin's steady efforts are quickly thwarted by a corrupt legal system, which no sooner incite more sinister consequences as a result.

Toad's Oil (Yakusho Koji, Japan 2009)

Yakusho Koji's directorial debut is a whimsical tale about an eccentric, self-centred millionaire, Takuro (Koji), who impersonates his recently deceased son over the phone to hide the news from the boy's love-struck girlfriend. Although done to cushion the impact from her, Takuro's brave performance is really a roundabout way of facing his flaws as a father. The title refers to his childhood memories of a nomadic merchant and his wife who peddle toad's oil, a reputed panacea for all mortal ailments. Played in a series of fantasy flashbacks, they in fact lend poignant depth to Takuro's denial of his loss.

Vengeance (Johnnie To, Hong Kong / France 2009)

Slick and flashy in execution, *Vengeance* is textbook Johnnie To. French musician Johnny Hallyday plays a retired assassin out to avenge his daughter after her family is targeted in a triad hit. Arriving in Hong Kong with an incipient bout of amnesia, he wisely enlists three hired guns to hunt down the mastermind. Complementing Hallyday's geriatric agility are To regulars Lam Ka Tung, Lam Suet and Anthony Wong, who are as cool as any To hitmen can be. The set pieces are roundly satisfying, except for one taking place in a landfill; although widely praised, it's in fact fairly trashy.

Author Information

Brandon WEE lives in Toronto. He has written for *Asia Pacific Arts* (Los Angeles), *Cineaste* (New York), *Cinema Scope* (Toronto), *Ricepaper* (Vancouver), and *Senses of Cinema* (Melbourne).